DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 733 RC 020 522

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TITLE Stories for Language Revitalization in Nahuatl and Chichimeca.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 12p.; In: Stabilizing Indigenous Languages; see RC 020 517.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American Indian Education; *American Indian Languages; *Bilingual Education Programs; Bilingual Students; *Childrens Writing; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; Foreign Countries; Indigenous Populations; *Language Maintenance; *Language Skill Attrition; Language Usage; Literacy Education; Mexicans; *Native Language Instruction; Story Telling
IDENTIFIERS Chichimeca; Language Shift; *Mexico (Central); Nahuatl

ABSTRACT

Central Mexico is home to over 20 indigenous languages whose speakers still occupy their original ancestral communities. In this region, acute language conflict between Native languages and Spanish, the official state language, greatly affects elementary school students such as those in San Isidro Buensuceso Tlaxcala and Mision de Chichimecas in Guanajuato state. With fewer than 2,000 speakers, the Chichimeca language of Mision de Chichimecas faces an uncertain future. Of 285 elementary students, only 110 have retained productive language capacity. Although residents of San Isidro represent the largest indigenous language group (Nahuatl) in Mexico, they too are experiencing indigenous language erosion. A study in the two towns examined the practical benefits of teaching and promoting vernacular or native language literacy. Six years ago, a bilingual education program was implemented at Xicohtencatl Elementary School in San Isidro. Today, the national anthem is sung in both Nahuatl and Spanish, students speak Nahuatl freely, and some bilingual materials are available. However, literacy is still introduced exclusively in Spanish, as is virtually all academic content through sixth grade. Evaluation of student native language writing skills in grades 2, 4, and 6 revealed a more dynamic use and mastery of the Spanish language, with language skills in Nahuatl progressively lagging behind. The early stages of the Chichimeca bilingual education program point to promising new directions for reversing language loss. The program has addressed problems of teacher language competence and linguistic variation by providing teachers with taped versions of stories narrated in Chichimeca by older more fluent students. In addition, a written edition of materials is being prepared for teachers. This paper suggests that narrative structure is a key interpretive framework for language learning and could serve as a bridge between oral and writing skills to the benefit of both language preservation and literacy development. (LP)

ED 395 733

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# Stories for Language Revitalization in Náhuatl and Chichimeca

Norbert Francis and Rafael Nieto Andrade

Central Mexico is home to over 20 indigenous languages whose speakers often still occupy their original ancestral communities. The region is also an arena of acute language conflict.

For the elementary school students of San Isidro Buensuceso Tlaxcala and Misión de Chichimecas on the outskirts of San Luis de la Paz in Guanajuato there exists a sharp division regarding the norms of language use that all children internalize early in their academic careers: the contexts of formal classroom language and writing belonging to Spanish, the intimate, oral, face-to-face domains of family, ritual kinship, friendship and community to Náhuatl and Chichimeca.

At first glance the two communities would seem to share few characteristics in common to justify a collaborative research endeavor on language and literacy [for background to this study see Francis (1991, 1994) & Nieto (1991)]. With fewer than 2,000 speakers, the Chichimeca language faces an uncertain future in the short term. Initial estimates calculated that out of the 285 elementary students enrolled 110 have retained productive language capacities, with 33 demonstrating various degrees of "passive bilingualism."

Among the 50% of the "monolingual" Spanish speakers, a significant portion, under the right circumstances, would be able to display some incipient knowledge of the indigenous language, but the direction and rate of language shift is unmistakably evident. On the other hand, the residents of San Isidro, often conscious of their illustrious historical heritage, descendants of a great imperial civilization and speakers of the largest indigenous language group in Mexico (conservatively numbering 1.5 million), tend to project far into the future the cultural and linguistic continuity of their people, at least on the national level.

However, in recent years, indigenous language erosion in the Tlaxcala highlands (Malintzi volcano region) has proceeded at a rate comparable to that of many of the smaller, less ethnolinguistically secure languages of Mexico. San Isidro, together with its immediate neighbor just across the state line, San Miguel Canoa, stands alone as the last Náhuatl community where over 90% of the population has retained the autochthonous language. Nutini and Issacs (1974) estimated that as recently as 1890, in more than 100 communities along the western slope of the Malintzi over 70% of the population was monolingual in Náhuatl. In the same region, the 1990 census (INEGI, 1990) indicates only one (San Isidro) where monolingualism surpasses



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10%, and lists less than five towns with a majority that is still bilingual.

**Language Choices and Bilingual Education**

One of the dilemmas that both bilingual teachers in the field and educational specialists at the Dirección General de Educación Indígena (DGEI) face revolves around the role of reading and writing in the Native languages, notwithstanding the official policy of maintenance bilingual education (DGEI, 1990). Given the strong identification, at the community level, between Spanish and literacy, the ambivalent and contradictory postures regarding the use, in general, of the indigenous languages in school, and the accelerating language displacement and erosion in most communities, what are the practical benefits of teaching and promoting vernacular literacy? Above all, if the objectives of language preservation may not be served by attempting to extend the domains of the indigenous language to include formal academic discourse (particularly writing) as some investigators have suggested (for a discussion see: Pardo, 1993, Cerrón-Palomino and López, 1990, Hornberger, 1988, Zepeda, 1995), a more effective alternative to literacy teaching would be more readily at hand in the Structured Immersion-type, second language reading programs gaining currency in the United States. Náhuatl and Chichimeca language and content, for example, would be more profitably reinforced and transmitted exclusively within the more traditionally circumscribed oral domains, reserving literacy for the language of wider communication.

Without pretending to arrive at a definitive answer regarding the oral/written dilemma, the present joint project has attempted to explore the possibilities, and test the limits so to speak, of reading and writing in the ancestral languages in communities where the forces of language substitution have, for their part, tested the limits of sociolinguistic imbalance and conflict. Perhaps one of our younger informants, second grader Natalia B. expressed most eloquently the tension she personally feels. She denied the possibility that one day Náhuatl would no longer be spoken in town, with Spanish taking its place. Pressed on the issue (If one day it did happen . . . ): "Me sentiría avergonzada porque haber cambiado de voz me equivocara de hablar en náhuatl o en castilla" [I would feel ashamed because having changed voices I would make mistakes in Náhuatl and Spanish]. When she grows up to be an adult and has her own children they would learn both: "porque cuando vamos a Puebla tenemos que decir buenas cosas allí y traer algo para comer" [because when we go to Puebla we have to say good things there and bring (home) something to eat].

Parents, today, are generally supportive of the new bilingual teaching staff. Aside from the tangible benefits stemming directly from the implementation of a new program, interviewees pointed to the





evident advantages of improved student/teacher communication and school/family relations that stand in stark contrast to the former Spanish-only regime. However, on the question of introducing content (particularly reading and writing) in Náhuatl, the consensus quickly breaks down.

**Cultural and Formal Schemata for Creating Texts**

Focusing for the moment on our initial findings from a series of renarration activities of traditional stories where the students produced first drafts of their own versions from an oral presentation, a number of general observations set the stage for further analysis of the writing samples:

1. Discourse-level responses:

Especially in regard to the writing samples in the indigenous language, an exceptional facility and productivity was evident on the part of bilingual students resulting in a negligible number of limited response or "non-story" responses (lists, unconnected phrases), with "passive bilinguals" writing in Spanish. Testimony to the schema activating power of traditional narrative structure (Mandler, 1984), providing the subjects with such an organizational framework for accessing memory and reconstructing a coherent discourse evidently minimized the inhibiting factors of novelty of writing in the indigenous language, and the lack of experience in general, in any language, with this particular sort of academic task (planned, sustained production of integral/continuous texts). Perhaps for many of the students the activity indeed represented a kind of violation, of implicit language use norms.

2. Transfer of encoding strategies from Spanish to the indigenous language:

In general, the composing process was characterized by a flexible and seemingly unburdensome application of individual working hypotheses regarding the sound/symbol correspondences of the students' respective languages. For many, if not the majority, of the youngsters the activities represented a genuine experience in an active recreation of the writing system being the first time they had attempted to apply the graphophonic relationships learned in Spanish to the other language that they speak.

3. Code-switching:

Students relied on the extensive utilization of translinguistic resources to compensate for gaps in lexical availability and knowledge of morphological and syntactic structures, as well as, in some cases, as a discourse devise. The broad variation in code-switching and borrowing in the context of a more deliberate and planned expressive language activity (that of writing) offers a rich opportunity to examine these processes, and students' perceptions of and reflections upon language use (e.g. the permissibility and limits of "language mixing", often



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denigrated as *cuatrerito* speech, *medio náhuatl-medio español*, and so forth.)

**Transfers from Spanish to Náhuatl, Oral to Written**

Six years ago the parents of Xicohténcatl Elementary School received with decided apprehension the assignment of the twelve young Náhuatl speaking bilingual teachers who arrived with the commission of implementing the new language policy in the state's "most indigenous" town (incidentally, as well, the locality with the highest illiteracy rate, the only one to officially surpass the 50% mark in 1990). Under sustained pressure from many quarters to maintain the traditional Castellanization practices of exclusive Spanish instruction, combined with virtually no formal preparation regarding the formidable practical challenges of teaching reading, writing and mathematics in Náhuatl, the staff has tried to resist the forces of linguistic assimilation. Today, the national anthem is sung in Náhuatl *and* Spanish, students speak Náhuatl freely in the patio and in the classroom, even, on occasion, with their teacher (although such a marked display would indeed be rare), some bilingual materials are available, and teachers offer isolated capsules of content in Náhuatl (the alphabet, vocabulary items, participation in the occasional regional contests sponsored by the DGEI in poetry, narrative and renditions of the state and national anthems in Náhuatl). What we could characterize as a "symbolic valorization" of the indigenous language corresponds to a kind of "de facto maintenance" program (being its incidental and de facto nature the essential characteristic). Initial literacy is still laboriously introduced exclusively in Spanish as is virtually all academic content through sixth grade.

Our survey of oral proficiency in both languages (results of the *Entrevista Bilingüe* administered to a sample of 60 1st, 2nd, 4th and 6th graders, followed up by observation of language preference of the same students in informal settings) suggests that the atmosphere of "active tolerance" at the Escuela Xicohténcatl offers the young bilinguals an important sociolinguistic space (among many in town) in which the development of their language skills in Náhuatl actually thrives, despite the absence of any formal teaching program in vernacular literacy. Casual observation during recess, in the library, etc., confirmed our informants' assertions that among young people there is significant social pressure to be fluent in the indigenous language (notwithstanding the wide range of negative and ambivalent perceptions associated with being bilingual, especially when visiting Puebla or the larger more centrally located towns).

It is within this context that our evaluations of reading and writing in Náhuatl and Spanish shed some light on the transfer processes that the students' performance actually revealed. The general trends from three sets of evaluations seen in the graphs in Table 1 appear to be





representative of development of each language in regard to school related tasks:

1) Graph #1— A combined Reading Miscue Inventory/CLOZE assessment utilizing texts of appropriate difficulty for grades 2, 4 and 6 in each language.

2) Graph #2— Based on series of illustrations that "tell a story", an evaluation of oral narrative measuring global coherence and "text-like qualities" that go beyond the purely descriptive level.

3) Graph #3— Scoring of writing samples for similar story features.

As expected, from 2nd to 4th to 6th grade literacy/literary skills marked significant developmental increments in the language of instruction (Spanish). The general upward trend in oral story telling, reading and writing in Náhuatl verifying two processes at work: 1) a broad tendency that reflects the maintenance and consolidation of Náhuatl among the "early native speakers," and the full acquisition and analogous consolidation of the language on the part of a significant minority of kindergarten and first grade Spanish dominant "passive bilinguals," 2) the consequent access to textual and discourse competencies associated with a common underlying proficiency (Cummins, 1989).

Clearly, the course of the Náhuatl scores could have traced a less positive inclination. Observations of the testing sessions confirmed that the new academic tasks that the students were asked to engage in (indeed a contrived and manipulated context) would be more challenging than writing in Spanish, evoking varied expressions of mild frustration, consternation, and surprise. As an informal test of the limits of transfer of cognitive/academic language skills we could tentatively point to its broad universal applicability. Even under assuredly unfavorable conditions of language conflict, marginalization, and displacement of the vernacular underlying competencies are still available to the young bilinguals in both languages.

However, the visual impression that emerges in every case (see Table 1 graphs #1, #2 and #3), the Spanish curves showing a more dynamic tendency, with Náhuatl seeming to progressively lag behind and lose ground from 2nd to 6th grade, can be attributed to the consequences of the "de facto maintenance" circumstance (Graph #4). The "scissors" open as a result of the noticeably less precipitous ascent of the (again in all cases) lower curves. Transfer is neither automatic nor assured, with the long term trend pointing toward an eventual erosion of literacy skills in Náhuatl.



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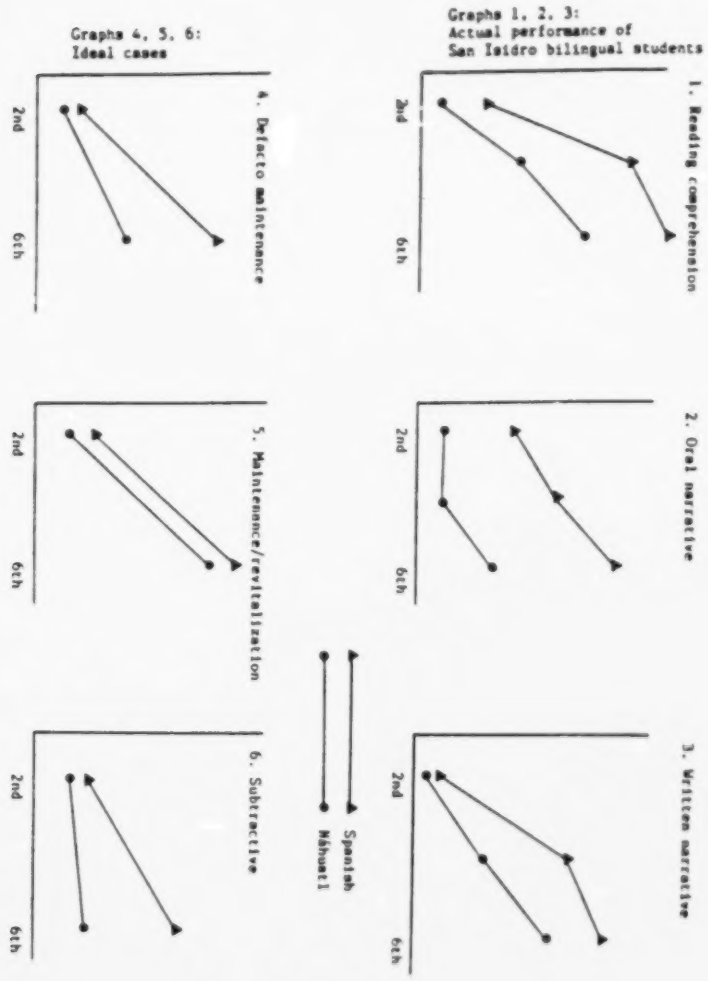
**Table 1:** Graphs of student language learning in Spanish and Náhuatl








Speculatively, we could predict that a systematic "heritage language" type program aimed at maintenance and revitalization would ideally allow for a more balanced and additive development (Graph #5). Extending our hypothetical typology we would probably find that the scissors open wider with a declining slope for the Náhuatl curve in schools where "active tolerance" and "de facto maintenance" give way to reluctant acquiescence regarding the use of the indigenous language. Here our point of reference is the situation in the public schools just across the state line in San Miguel where the relationship of forces would preclude any sort of repression of the language (in fact our informants insisted that "on the other side" children were never punished for speaking *mexicano*). However, almost all teachers are monolingual Spanish speakers, with Spanish completely monopolizing all official school language functions. Hypothetically, students from San Miguel, although they belong to the same speech community as the sample from Xicohténcatl School, would not perform as well on similar measures of reading, writing and story telling in Náhuatl.

The extreme range of the continuum clearly begins to approach the outright subtractive variant (Graph #6) reported to us by our informants who are natives of the formerly Náhuatl speaking towns along the Puebla/Tlaxcala highway. On a final note concerning the series of ideal cases, it would seem, at least in theory, that the most propitious circumstance for the development of high level *Spanish* literacy skills would correspond to model #5, and the least advantageous to the "linguistic cleansing" variant of #6.

### Misión de Chichimecas

The early stages of the research in San Luis de la Paz have pointed to promising new directions for educators working in projects whose objective consists of reversing language death. Originating from an initiative on the part of the local school personnel, all of whom are monolingual Spanish speakers themselves, the introduction of traditional Chichimeca narratives was viewed initially as a means of boosting students' self esteem. The young *mecos'* language, a distant member of the Otomi-Pame family (Soustelle, 1937, Manrique, 1988), is variously portrayed as barking, yelping, or some other non-human communication system by their more "Hispanic" peers.

Even among the more self-assertive bilingual youngsters, their command of Chichimeca is often partial. From their point of view only a minority "speak well," reinforcing the notion that somehow the language is not "complete," a kind of underdeveloped code, unfit for the more elevated functions, such as writing. Fewer and fewer adults appear to be proficient speakers, and the high frequency of code-switching and borrowed items from Spanish only confirms, for many, the precarious future of the language.

In the Náhuatl speaking region of Tlaxcala bilingual teachers allude to a series of objective obstacles to teaching in the indigenous language: historical dispersion and isolation of the communities has exacerbated dialectical variation, creating communication gaps even from one town to the next, and the lack of standardization makes it impractical to use the Náhuatl primer that is based on a supradialectical "agglutinated" edition. Openly and honestly many refer to their own hesitations and insecurities in regard to good pronunciation, reading fluency, spelling norms, correct grammar, and so forth. In this respect, the unique contribution of the Chichimeca project consists of addressing the problem of teacher language competence and linguistic variation in the most direct manner (from the perspective of the least favorable combination of "objective factors"; no availability of printed material, monolingual Spanish-speaking faculty).

Since the beginning of last school year high quality anthologies of tape recorded versions of stories narrated in Chichimeca by the older more fluent students are available to teachers in the preschool, elementary and middle school levels. In addition, a more complete written edition is being prepared with the generous financial support of the Culture and Education Commission of the State of Guanajuato. Teachers have availed themselves of the material as templates for writing and for evoking and projecting representations for ethnic content in the graphic and plastic arts. For the DGEI specialists who responded to the teachers' petitions for technical advice and consultation, the project has generated an unprecedented corpus of children's writing in Chichimeca previously unrecorded in any natural communicative/expressive context related to school.

**Concluding Remarks**

On the methodological level while our general approach was dictated by integrative/holistic considerations, including global and qualitative criteria for evaluating the language samples, any purely "naturalistic" compilation of observed behaviors certainly would have yielded rather poor and unrepresentative samples of the bilingual youngsters' underlying competencies. A more "experimental" condition where a deliberate attempt is made to provoke a particular type of response revealing language knowledge structures belonging to a certain domain (Wesche, 1992) allowed us to examine and record proficiencies that normally one would never observe in the classroom.

To the extent that artistic and formal discourses cut across the oral/written distinction (Tannen, 1987, Horowitz, 1990, Widdowson, 1984) our interest in examining children's writing in their indigenous language would seem justified. The poetic, ceremonial, pedagogic and narrative genres of "oral tradition" communities are certainly more "text-like", amenable to *fixing* in new, "less traditional," ways. In fact,





impressionistic comparisons from our children's writing samples suggest that the "typical" advantages of the written modality (the opportunity to plan, reflect and revise, more processing time, and so forth) were exploited rather successfully by the students in San Isidro and San Luis. The facilitating factor of "priming" story schemata, by providing a template for renarration, maximized production without sacrificing variation (narrower in regard to thematic content, but highly variable in terms of the key criteria of story structure). And as experienced educators can attest to, the kinds of procedures that yield favorable results in terms of content validity in an assessment situation should prosper in the teaching domain as well.

In his discussion of the concept of "narrativity" as a key interpretative framework for language learning, Danesi (1991) points out that "children develop conceptual schemes primarily through story formats"; (quoting Gordon Wells, 1986) "constructing stories in the mind is one of the most fundamental means of making meaning; as such it is an activity that pervades all aspects of learning." Danesi argues that:

> Narrative structure reflects the actual structure of human cognition. . . . Stories provide the intelligible formats that mobilize the child's natural ability to learn from how we understand ourselves and the social world in which we live . . . . [giving] pattern and continuity to human perception and experience. The processing of narrative information in more than one culturally specific code can thus be seen to expand the children's repertory of symbolic options and, manipulate symbols — the tools of intellect. (1991, p. 654)

If the "narrativization of experience" (Gee, 1989) represents a kind of bridge between the basic universal face-to-face communicative language skills and the first texts that children begin to create and understand, then stories, of all genres and varieties, must form the core of any literacy program. Speech communities that have been able to maintain a level of continuity with cultural practices associated with the traditional narrative can press this resource into service to the benefit of both language preservation and literacy development in general.



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